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Wright Ends Assassination Panel Feud

Sprague Will Cut Staff, But Gets to Keep Job

Associated Press

House Majority Leader Jim Wright said today he has ordered the House Assassinations Committee staff cut, told investigator Richard Sprague to work with the director appointed by Chairman Henry B. Gonzalez and convinced Gonzalez not to press efforts to fire Sprague.

Wright said that Sprague had said he would cut the committee staff and work with Gonzalez' staff director. In return, Gonzalez had agreed to keep Sprague, Wright said.

THE HOUSE Administration Committee has suspended payment of salaries and other expenses to the committee temporarily, Wright said today, until it is assured that they total no more than the monthly limit of $84,000.

Right now, Wright said in an interview, the salary expenses alone for the staff exceed $82,000. He said he does not care who is taken off the payroll, but he told Sprague to draw up a list of those who had to go to reduce salary expenses "by a substantial amount."

HE SAID he met yesterday with Sprague and the man appointed by Gonzalez to succeed him, Kenneth Brooten, to try to reconcile the differences that have immobilized the committee for weeks, blocking its investigation into the killings of President John F. Kennedy and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

Gonzalez, a Texas Democrat, tried to fire Sprague Feb. 10, but was blocked by other members of his committee who said Gonzalez could not take such an action alone. Gonzalez had been angered by Sprague's refusal to cut the staff and what the chairman called Sprague's disparaging remarks about him to the staff.

Gonzalez had said the staff cuts were required after the House refused to approve Sprague's request for more than $6 million a year for the probe and had extended the committee's life only through March 31 under a limited budget.

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Gonzalez had cut off the staff's telephones, persuaded Atty. Gen. Griffin Bell to suspend access to FBI documents for Sprague and his staff and had appointed Brooten to take over and find out how much the Sprague staff was spending each month.

THE SITUATION has remained in limbo — with Sprague still holding on to the offices and Brooten not allowed inside — because Gonzalez has been ill with the flu in his hometown of San Antonio.

Wright said he has tried to step in and mediate the situation to see whether the investigation can be resumed with dignity and without embarrassment to the House.

He said he:

- Told Sprague to start working with Brooten, as of yesterday.
- Told Brooten to evaluate the staff spending and report to results.
- Told Sprague to cut the staff.
- Told the two to find a way to get the telephones back in service, with the calls charged to his office temporarily.

Wright said both Gonzalez and Sprague have to yield if the impasse is to be solved and the investigation salvaged.

"In this instance, I'm 'Marrying Sam' conducting a shotgun wedding but neither party wants to get married. It's a little hard when you have to hold the shotgun on both of them," he said.

He said unless the situation improves dramatically the House is likely to shelve the investigation by refusing to vote more money when funds run out March 31.